

## What is a Hoosier?

<sup>1</sup>hoosier [perhaps an alteration of Cumberland dialect, *hoozer*, anything large of its kind]

1: an awkward, unhandy, or unskilled person; especially: an ignorant rustic.

2: hoosier [usually capitalized]: Indianan--used as a nickname.

<sup>3</sup>hoosier (verb) slang: to loaf on or botch a job.

*Webster's Third International Dictionary, 1976*

hoosier A hillbilly or rustic; an unmannerly or objectionable person.

*Dictionary of American Regional English, 1991*

Before its use in America, *hoosier* was used in England to refer to someone who lived in the hills or mountains. It may be related to the French *osier*, meaning someone from the countryside, an uncultivated person. This term is still commonly used in Eastern Canada.

In colonial America, the terms *cracker* and *hoosier* were widely used to refer to white farmers who did not own slaves or large plantations. Because the best agricultural land, the flat land near the rivers and seacoast, was generally used for growing cash crops in large plantations, small farms--usually in the hills and mountains--were identified with subsistence farming, and these farmers were poor and usually uneducated. Therefore, these terms had a derogatory connotation. Linguistic maps of the southern states indicate that *cracker* was used more often in the coastal areas of Virginia and North Carolina and in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. *Hoosier* was predominant in the mountains of Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina<sup>1</sup>.

The southern half of Indiana, along the Ohio River, was settled first, along with Kentucky and Tennessee, and the earliest settlers came largely from the Appalachian region--Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina. By the early 1800s *hoosier* was widely used in Indiana to refer to poor farmers or ignorant, rustic people in general.

The first newspaper usage of *hoosier* to refer to people from Indiana in general was in 1832. As sometimes happens, a nickname that originally had a negative connotation was adopted and used with pride by the bearers of the name. By the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865), this nickname was firmly established. During the war, men from all parts of the United States came into close contact and relied on these nicknames to identify each other. Some examples: Indiana = Hoosiers, Maine = Foxes, Delaware = Muskrats, Ohio = Buckeyes, Wisconsin = Badgers, Iowa = Hawkeyes, New York = Knickerbockers.

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<sup>1</sup>Raven I. McDavid, Jr. and Virginia McDavid, "Cracker and Hoosier," *Names: Journal of the American Name Society* 21:2 (June 1973), 161-167.

## Myths and Legends about the origin of "Hoosier"

In his classic inquiry into the origins of American English, H.L. Mencken<sup>2</sup> documented many myths and legends about the supposed origin of *hoosier*.

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From the *Providence Journal*, 1838:

Throughout all the early Western settlements were men who rejoiced in their physical strength, and on numerous occasions, demonstrated this.... They were styled by their fellow citizens *hushers*, from their primary capacity to still their opponents. The boatmen of Indiana were formerly as rude and primitive a set as could well belong to a civilized community, and they were often in the habit of displaying their pugilistic accomplishments upon the levee at New Orleans. Upon a certain occasion there one of these rustic professors of the noble art very adroitly and successfully practiced the "fancy" upon several individuals at one time. Being himself not a native of this Western world, in the exuberance of his exultation he sprang up, exclaiming, in foreign accent, "I'm a hoosier, I'm a hoosier." Some of the New Orleans papers reported the case, and afterward transferred the corruption of the epithet *husher* (hoosier) to all boatmen from Indiana, and from thence to all her citizens.

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From *America by River and by Rail*, 1872:

The...Hoosiers...are proverbially inquisitive. They are said to have got their nickname because they could not pass a house without pulling the latchstring and crying out "Who's here?"

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Indiana historian J.P. Dunn in 1911 cited another legend:

Hoosier is believed by some to come from the family name of one of the contractors for the Louisville & Portland canal, under construction from 1826 to 1831. This contractor recruited his laborers from the Indiana side of the Ohio River, and the neighbors called them "Hoosier's men," from which the name Hoosier came to be applied to Indiana men generally.

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English tourist, Amelia M. Murray, reported in 1851 that she had heard this story:

The name Hoosier originated in a settler's exclaiming "Huzza!" upon gaining victory over a marauding party from a neighboring State.

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The Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley related a legend he had heard:

The early settlers...were very vicious fighters, and not only gouged and scratched, but frequently bit off noses and ears. This was so ordinary an affair that a settler coming into a

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<sup>2</sup> H.L. Mencken, *The American Language, Supplement II*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.

barroom on a morning after a fight and seeing an ear on the floor would merely push it aside with his foot and carelessly ask, "Whose ear?"

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▶▶ Historian Dunn and philologist Mencken dismiss these stories as "folk etymology at its worst" and "moonshine."

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